January 23, 2003

MEMO

TO:

Barry Drucker
Minerals Management Service
381 Elden St.
Herndon, VA 20170-4817

FROM:

William Burton (Program Manager)
Versar, Inc.
9200 Rumsey Road
Columbia, MD 21045

SUBJECT:

Progress report for Contract No. 1435-01-02-CT-85060 "Environmental Investigation of the Use of Shoals Offshore Delaware and Maryland by Mobile Benthos and Finfish Species"

This is the fifth progress report of the MMS finfish study that summarizes our accomplishments on this contract since the last report submitted in October 2003. Fall sampling for this reporting period was conducted in November of last year. All gill net sets, commercial, and experimental trawling were accomplished without incidence. Spiny dogfish and three different skate species (winter, clearnose and little skate) dominated catches during the fall sampling. Several invertebrate species were also present during the MMS sampling with the common and coarse-hand lady crabs being the most abundant. One event worth noting was a very large commercial trawl catch of striped bass on the Fenwick shoal, with an estimated 1,200 stripers in one 10-minute tow. This was the biggest commercial catch to date and the stripers were most likely migrating fish. After the biological sampling was completed the bioacoustics portion of the project began in early December. Barring a few weather delays no problems were encountered and the fall bioacoustics survey was successful. The information collected in that survey seemed to indicate a lot of fish on the shoals and over the reference sites, however computer driven data analysis by Dr. Kyle Hartman from the University of West Virginia are pending. All field data were reviewed and the data were appended to Versar's growing database for the program. As reported in the October progress report, Versar is conducting a similar project for the USACE Philadelphia. This project is being conducted within the three-mile zone at two candidate sites slated for sand removal. Following the same trends as the summer 2003 survey, catches from these two sites were very different than those from the MMS study shoals. Trawl collections produced very high numbers of butterfish, spotted hake, and Atlantic croaker, and weakfish. Undoubtedly, this work will enhance the MMS study by providing addition reference sites to help place the fish community abundance and composition observed in Federal Waters to those observed in water inside the three-mile limit.

We are currently gearing up to conduct our winter 2004 sampling and we anticipate starting this sampling event in late January.

As mentioned in the last progress report we prepared and delivered a presentation to the MMS and Delaware Geological Survey workshop on offshore sand resources held at the University of Delaware on October 23, 2003. That talk with preliminary results can be viewed along with all the talks from that conference at the web site: http://www.udel.edu/dgs/ftp/offshore/. The title of our talk is Essential Fish Habitat. During this reporting period that talk was also given at the Tidewater chapter of the American Fisheries Society in early January. Many fisheries professionals from the Mid-Atlantic region were in attendance and several pertinent comments and questions were raised. This recent exposure will most certainly serve to enhance the outcome of this project.